

**in  
sight**  
YMCA IRELAND reflective practice journal  
Faith at Work



# Introduction

By Ivan McMahon & Michele Taylor

*Welcome to 'Faith at Work', the fifth edition of Insight, YMCA Ireland's Reflective practice journal.*

Over recent years, many debates have taken place around what it means for the YMCA to be a 'Christian' organisation in contemporary Ireland and what difference this "label" makes for the young people who use our services as well as for volunteers and staff who work within it.

As a faith based organisation that has chosen not to define itself in terms of traditional "doctrinal or faith statements", people outside the organisation often have difficulty in understanding how our claim to be a faith based organisation makes any difference in our practice. However this same dilemma is often voiced by those inside the organisation as well!

For many in the organisation, agreeing a definition of what it means to be a Christian organisation is not what we should be about, rather our focus should be about how our faith impacts on our practice. In other words our 'Faith at Work', is more vital than our 'Faith in Words'. As an organisation, we have attempted to create an equilibrium with both equally valid positions.

Our recently agreed Christian Emphasis Policy and Guidelines outlines for anyone involved with the YMCA how we understand our role as a faith based organisation – this is in some ways our 'Faith in Words'. Our programmes and how we treat each young person, volunteer and staff person we trust, will reflect our 'Faith at Work'.

As an organisation the YMCA has never been and will probably never be at a place of complete rest as it struggles with

these issues because in each generation the YMCA needs to own both the journey and outcomes for itself.

*"The YMCA is far from being perfect and fortunately knows it. But in each succeeding generation it has earnestly sought to become what, by the grace of God it could be, never reaching that goal but always reaching for it."*

The ten articles which you will find in this journal will hopefully help to introduce the reader to some of the current dilemmas which the organisation faces and hopefully in the process clear up some of the confusion about the YMCA and its struggle to be a faith based organisation.

This particular edition of Insight has been targeted at a different audience from our earlier journals in the series i.e. the churches and other faith based organisations. Our hope is that as a result of this particular issue of Insight you will have picked up on some of the current issues facing us as an organisation, which may have parallels or resonances with your own church or organisation's experience. We would tentatively hope that our deliberations may play some small role in creating debate and dialogue with others who share our world view so that together we might become more effective in working towards building a sense of "Shalom" in our communities and in our island.

## Contents

### To serve all people regardless...?

By Brian Murtagh Page 1

### Modelling a Different World View

By Ivan McMahon Page 6

### Caring for our Staff and volunteers

By Stewart Morris  
& Gareth Johnston Page 9

### YMCA, Church and Community

By Hugo Dale Page 11

### Listening and Learning

By Cesca Tyrrell with Kitty Dullea  
and Mary McLean Page 13

### Journeys Into the Unknown

Personal journeys from  
Hedley Abernethy, Helen Jary  
and Geraldine Stinton Page 15

### The place of 'Heart and Justice' within YMCA work

By Gef Dickson Page 19

### Times they are a-changing

A conversation... Page 22

### Communicating A Book Based Faith To A Post-Literate Generation?

Dissertation Abstract  
By Sue Pearmain Page 24

### Issues for the future

By Michele Taylor Page 24

*The views stated in this journal are not necessarily those of YMCA Ireland. The articles reflect the opinions and perspectives of the contributors alone*

# “To serve all people regardless...”

by Brian Murtagh

*Early in 2002, Ballincollig YMCA in partnership with Ballincollig and Bandon Youthreach centres were asked by the Southern Health Board to develop a peer education- based training programme aimed at young people in the 16-25 age group, on the subject of sexual health. In this article one of the trainers, Brian Murtagh, a YMCA Development Officer based at West Dublin YMCA, explores some of the issues and questions which arose for the YMCA as a faith based organisation during the process.*

As one of the trainers asked to run this programme I feared from the outset that this could be a minefield for the YMCA. Working for equality between Catholics and Protestants, travellers and settled, North and South seemed relatively safe in the face of this particular challenge.

Some very real questions emerged: How could we as an organisation be true to traditional Christian values and beliefs and to our commitment to equality, diversity and fairness to all, in a programme which would throw us into some of the controversial areas of sex and sexuality? How would trainers in the Good Sex Programme, accustomed to operating within the YMCA with its fairly explicit Christian terms of reference, work with others operating within a more secular framework? How could this programme in turn birth a training experience for young adults which would equip them to work in this field with integrity, truth and tolerance? The answers to some of these questions are still in the making.

From the outset the YMCA felt it important that in the training there needed to be an opportunity for everyone to explore the impact of personal and organisational values on the subject matter and their implications on how it would be delivered. This was well received by the inter agency committee involved as long as a diversity of values and beliefs could be explored. This agreement, simple and easily achievable as it may sound, highlights probably one of the most important learning points from the programme: i.e. the need for an honest, transparent and inclusive exploration of peoples' values, beliefs and experiences around sex and sexuality. This approach laid the way for work on related themes:

spirituality and sexuality, stereotyping, masculinity and femininity, youth culture and sex, intimacy and boundaries.

The programme which eventually developed and which has become known as the *Good Sex Programme* raised questions around what if anything is distinctive about the YMCA's value base in approaching a specific subject such as young people and sexual health and how inclusive could this ethos be in working with people with a very different set of personal values.

The Training the Trainers element was completed with very positive feedback

---

*“For they (physical pleasures) are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.....” C.S.Lewis*

---

from all participants. Those of us involved as trainers have trod some unexplored areas in the process, though it should be noted that Dublin City YMCA pioneered some excellent work some years ago in this field of working with sexually hurt people through the *Living Waters Programme*.

As an organisation committed to working with young adults who are often sexually active, it is important that the YMCA begins to address the whole area of sexual health and well-being in a way which is consistent with good professional practice and which also reflects the Christian values of the organisation.

This article attempts to address some of the issues which came up in the Cork based Training the Trainer course and tentatively suggests some possible headings and pointers for a much needed debate as the movement continues to try to be relevant in the ever changing sexual landscape inhabited by young people in Ireland.

An obvious but important starting point is that there is no such thing as a value-free approach to any kind of education or training. All involved in youth work have their own personal values and inevitably operate, at least some of the time, out of these values. It would be less than honest to claim that a particular youth work initiative; intervention or indeed publication is value-free. Indeed none of us involved in education have the benefit of a sort of private gallery above and beyond our contemporaries from which we have an objective vantage point on the world.

Our “world view” has been formed in a particular social/cultural/ religious milieu. It is essential that we try to be open and honest about our own “world view”, make our values and beliefs explicit and then are open to having these values and beliefs critiqued and even rejected. In doing this, we attempt to remain true to ourselves, the young people we serve and to the organisations within which we work.

In the course of YMCA's involvement in the *Good Sex Programme*, we had to put shoe leather on this principle by encouraging reflection and open discussion of issues in an exploratory and inductive style. A conscious effort was made to encourage the differing perspectives and values of the participating trainers while acknowledging (a) that both the trainers being trained and their targeted young people inhabit a society which, all-though

arguably quite adrift from, **is** rooted in Christian tradition and values (b) YMCA trainers have a responsibility to reflect and apply Christian values given the nature of the employing organisation and (c) young people need exposure to all the facts, all the arguments and issues and should be facilitated in reaching informed decisions built, not on reaction to current trends, but on thought- through principles.

In order to make this happen there was a commitment by all the participants to being honest and open and to building good relationships. Over the training we began to see elements of community being built which transcended being merely polite to each other. It was within this context we were able to explore some difficult issues.

As an organisation working with young people and families in the field of relationships and sexuality in an increasingly multicultural Ireland, the YMCA faces a considerable challenge. It needs to engage with the issues within local communities, to focus on the people we work with in the context of the organisation's commitment to build values based on Christian principles.

I will briefly propose some pointers and headings which may be useful in providing the YMCA with a general backdrop to a discussion in the area of working on sexual health for young adults:

- Sex and sexuality are of fundamental importance to our humanity, our spirituality and something that is intrinsically good and wholesome. God first thought of sex, created it and presumably delights in our sexuality in its right context. Indeed the middle book of the Bible, the Song of Solomon is a celebration of erotic love!
- Sexuality at its core is relational where we encounter other human beings and ultimately becoming one with another- bodily, emotionally, spiritually. It involves our longing to connect and ultimately merge in these areas; the need to love and be loved is an instinctive desire and need in every person. This need to be valued, affirmed, cared for and understood is a more constant drive than sex alone yet often becomes muddled or confused with it.
- Sexuality and spirituality, although not immediately obvious, are in fact mirror

images of each other and each reflects the health of the other

*"Sexuality is a figure or symbol of our ultimate destiny with God, because it is a search for the other. We feel that it is not good for us to be alone. We feel mysteriously incomplete; all our life is a searching for a remembered unity we have never yet known. Sexuality is one of the modes of our search; it is both a symptom of our incompleteness and a sign of our fulfillment. For the Christian, therefore, there are two ingredients in sexual experience. One is clearly participation in the joy of God." (Richard Holloway) or*

*"For they (physical pleasures) are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited....."*  
C.S.Lewis

---

*Unconditional compassionate care, even if it involves risks to ourselves individually or as an organisation must underpin all we do in this important field.*

---

If sexuality is about the power of connecting, the motivation to communicate as many believe it is, then we need to recognise that it seems to be expressed differently in men and women. Difference needs to be acknowledged and explored but inadequate explanations, past and present, of gender difference need to be critically analysed.

The lesson of history is that the pendulum is always moving when it comes to sex; somewhere from the extremes of strict moralism to sexual abandon. As a cross denominational Christian organisation we should try to discern where our society is at in this swing and how we can effectively respond through our youth work.

Our sexuality is powerful and must be handled with great care. Because it is such a powerful device for connection with others and an intrinsic part of the spiritual makeup of the human being,

whenever it is damaged, abused or misused the repercussions are enormous.

As an organisation we need to be concerned about the cost of casual sexual relationships. Those who have been sexually used by uncaring lovers, those who have been sexually abused will know the unspeakable damage that is done. Sexual damage is very deep. There are signs of people searching for new values, new understanding and new patterns of living.

As an organisation we need to find ways of encouraging faithfulness in marriage and relationships. We should try to develop and enhance young peoples' understanding of how to love and to be loved and to be sexual in a healthy way which affirms dignity.

Unconditional compassionate care, even if it involves risks to ourselves individually or as an organisation must underpin all we do in this important field.

Someone asked me recently a question which perhaps presents a challenge as to the practicality of some of these principles: "Should the YMCA work to support gay and lesbian young people who may have a need for our services but appear to have made choices which the Christian community are not generally in agreement with?"

My first thought was that the YMCA: "welcomes all people, **regardless**..." that we presumably have users from a wide cross section of sexual lifestyles and interests and that they are hopefully encountering that fundamental law within any initiative that claims to be Christian: the law of love.

This is all very well but it ignores the reality that homosexuals, gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities have probably either been ignored by or have picked up hostility from the Christian Church. It is probably fair to say that while there are many views within the broad church, the dominant view in the church in Ireland at the moment regards homosexuality as an inappropriate expression of sexuality.

Given this reality, it is likely that gays and lesbians might well feel that the 'all people **regardless**' YMCA principle would not extend to them. They may well expect to encounter a certain uneasiness



with their homosexuality within an overtly Christian organisation.

There is no easy answer to this dilemma. For example, while most Christians (hopefully) want to be supportive, inclusive and welcoming to homosexuals, gays and lesbians, their identity and lifestyles are seen as inappropriate by many Bible believing Christians.

I would like to suggest that if a YMCA is to work with people who are openly gay, a process rather than a policy is what is primarily needed. The context for working out the approach must be **in community** with the people concerned. It would be pointless to develop a policy for example on working with people who are in a different sexual lifestyle than ours at a remove from the people themselves. If a local YMCA is to be open to work with integrity and truth with gays and lesbians, then I believe that local YMCAs need to be engaged in the first place, with building real community and real engagement, with adult gays and lesbians.

It is doubtful that there are many local YMCA's ready to build such community at present. I believe that there would need to be a track record of genuine engagement with issues affecting homosexuals. We would need to educate ourselves as to the complexities of what one writer has termed "homosexualities" i.e. that there are many different kinds of homosexuals ranging from the gay person who has 'come out' to the man/woman in the local church who lives daily with the contradiction between their Christian commitment and the struggle within. Each is a person who, one at a time, needs to love and to be loved. Gay people are people with faces, people with names. They are often Christian people and whatever we might conclude about the larger issues their stories represent, we must never lose sight of their individuality, their strengths, their individual struggles, in many cases their individual pain. If we neglect faces we neglect the gospel.

***The following four questions might be useful in focusing a local YMCA as to its readiness to begin to build community with homosexuals:***

- 1. Are we ready to challenge ourselves (our local YMCA management committees), our local community or our local churches, to think about why many homosexual people still feel forced to hide an important part of themselves for fear of prejudicing their friendships, career or ministry?***
- 2. Are we open to being educated our selves and to educating our communities and our churches about the injustice and evils of discrimination against people on the grounds of sexual orientation?***
- 3. Are we ready and able to work in and through the many conflicts, vulnerabilities, challenges and commitments required for working with difference in the field of sexuality?***
- 4. Could we consider creating a place of welcome and understanding in our YMCA for men and women who don't feel that their gay orientation is for them a calling to a life of celibacy and may choose to love in same sex relationships even if we believe that homosexual sex falls short of the divine ideal for human sexuality?***

I recommend the reader here to Scott Peck's book *The Different Drum* in coming to an appreciation of how complex and risky the task of building community is for any group or organisation. Applying his model (briefly) in this context would mean that any initiative might necessarily go through the following three stages before reaching community: **(1) Pseudo Community, (2) Chaos and (3) Emptiness**

**Firstly**, in seeking to work in true community with people be they asylum seekers, travelling people or gay and lesbian groups, we may find ourselves trying to fake it. There can be a pretence of community, what Peck terms **"pseudo-community."** This involves avoiding conflict and essentially denies individual difference. We might for example conceal or deny or kick to touch on the commonly held belief amongst Christians that the Bible is clear that homosexual behaviour is

inappropriate, in favour of holding to our commitment as an organisation to be inclusive and tolerant. To do this would be to be in breach of the principle that we should be open about our values and beliefs.

**Secondly**, we may find ourselves coming up with well intentioned but misguided attempts to fix, heal or "convert" others to our point of view. The more attempts at such solutions, the more "chaos" will ensue accompanied by a feeling of lack of direction. This can be unpleasant and unproductive but perhaps part of the journey to true community. Fighting is better than pretending you are not divided. It's painful but it's a beginning!

**Thirdly**, there are only two ways out of "chaos." One way out can be through organisation – organising is a solution to chaos but it is not synonymous with building community. The only way to build community is into and through **"emptiness."** This involves, the group, emptying itself of barriers to communication or relationships-barriers such as expectations and preconceptions, prejudices, ideology, theology and solutions and the need to control or pre-determine the outcome of the process itself.

The YMCA in Ireland is involved in building community with an ever-wider range of different groups, nationally and locally. It is only from a context of experiencing community with these different groups that we can, with integrity, develop responses to the needs of such groups.

We have been relative late-comers in reflecting on the whole area of how to equip ourselves and young people to develop a healthy and positive attitude towards sex and sexuality. It is hoped that the work briefly described in this article and the pointers made above will provide a backdrop that will encourage us further in this important goal.

# Modelling a Different World View

By Ivan McMahon

*Over the past four years, the YMCA movement in Ireland has taken a close look at how it understands and then communicates its Christian mission to its staff/volunteers, users and funders. Out of this process came a new Christian Emphasis Policy in 2003. In this article Ivan McMahon – Deputy National Secretary, explores the practical implications of this new policy for our practice.*

*"The fruits of our times of stillness broadcast their seed over the heartlands of the world. It takes time to land though being so light, time to germinate, mature and multiply across our crowded days. Yet one tiny seed nurtured in a heart in time becomes a great forest reclaiming a tract of the Waste Land".*

We live at a time where the speed of change brought about by globalisation and other factors is unprecedented in human history! Our senses and minds are being bombarded with stimuli and information from all quarters.

Even within our families and homes we see this relentless process of sensory stimulation take root through home entertainment media undreamt of a generation ago!

Within our places of work these processes are particularly evident driven by Information Communication Technologies which mean that we have to be able to respond to demands for information not just in the traditional workplace, but on the road and even in our homes thanks to email and mobile phones!

Inevitably we find it difficult to find the time and space to critically reflect on the values underpinning our modern society and then to begin to find the time to develop our own set of principles and values. It's much easier just to imbibe the consumer led values of our western capitalist economies.

*"By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient's reason; (Screwtape- an experienced devil's advice to his apprentice) and once it is awake, who can foresee the result? Even if a particular train of thought can be twisted so as to end in our favour, you will find that you have been strengthening in your patient*

*the fatal habit of attending to universal issues and withdrawing his attention from the stream of immediate sense experience. Your business is to fix his attention on the stream. Teach him to call it 'real life' and don't let him ask what he means by 'real'".*

For those of us involved in Christian based youth organisations such as the YMCA, we have an onerous task when we consider our responsibilities as non-formal educators towards the 30,000 young people who come into contact with the organisation each year.

impotence of much of institutionalised religion to impact meaningfully on the spiritual development of current generation of young people. Indeed it can be argued that the

*"spiritual dimension takes on an added significance for young people and adults, at a time of very rapid change, and it is important that youth work continues to accommodate it, and does so in a way that is in touch with young people's own experiences and perceptions."*<sup>3</sup>.

---

*As an organisation the YMCA is committed to "to supporting people in turning to God in Christ, and to express that faith in the tradition of their choice. "If men are unable to perceive critically the themes of their time, and thus to intervene actively in reality, they are carried along on the wake of change. They see that the times are changing, but they are submerged in that change and so cannot discern its dramatic significance"*

Paulo Freire

---

If we take our Christian mission seriously then we must be prepared to help them to reflect on the values at the heart of the MTV/Playstation/Designer label culture and then be able to help them to at least consider an alternative value and lifestyle choice which sees the "eternal" as being as important as the "here and now" and where service towards others might be more rewarding than having the latest must-have gadget or piece of clothing!

However there is nothing to suggest that the spiritual dimension to young people's lives is any less important than in previous generations. What has changed from previous generations is the

So what are some of the ways in which youth work leaders/workers within the YMCA can make a contribution to helping young people develop an alternative world view which is based on Christian values and principles.

**In its 2003 Christian Emphasis Policy and Guidelines, the YMCA sought to define its distinctive role in the following ways:**

***The YMCA believes in the innate value of each person***

A distinctive contribution which Christian based organisations like the YMCA can make is how we view the young person

who use our services and programmes. According to consumerism, the person is seen purely as an economic unit whose value or worth is related to their earning and therefore spending potential.

With the growth of stereotyping and labelling of some people as “economic spongers” we can see how some people in our communities are being seen as having less value than others. Similarly the formal education sector’s emphasis on those who perform well academically and backed up by the inequity of resources spent on those at third level compared to those “fail” in the post-primary sector, further illustrates the divisions within our societies and the view that some are more equal than others!

Within the YMCA we have a responsibility to challenge these assumptions as we view each person as of equal worth and value not because of their “economic” or “academic” value but because they have been created in God’s own image.

Arising from this principle is the mandate which we have to challenge racist, sexist or sectarian stereotyping in all aspects of our work. We must create an environment where all young people regardless of their ethnic, gender, religious or sexual orientation will be made to feel welcomed in our programmes and services.

### ***The YMCA believes that each person has unrealised potential***

With increasing levels of individualism where a sense of community or civic responsibility is increasingly absent there is a responsibility for YMCA staff and volunteers to consider the outcomes of personal development programmes for young people.

Do we see them just as a way of making young people more effective in their dealings with each other or with employers or do we have a broader agenda?

*“As people made in God’s image, each person has unique potential and each young person should be encouraged to discover, celebrate, develop and use this potential within the context of service to friends, families and the wider community. Thus personal development within a Christian context is seen as a means to an end and not an end in itself.”<sup>4</sup>*

### ***YMCA volunteers and staff will model behaviour patterns and attitudes based on Christian values***

As volunteers and staff we should be committed to reflecting Christian values in every facet of our work within the YMCA. This means that in our work with young people during both normal daily interactions as well as during times of crisis we should seek to promote or model patterns of behaviour which reflect these Christian values. This should mean that the young person experiences a culture where;

explored. Then arising from our Christian value base we must also be prepared within the context of the curriculum to offer an alternative world view.

*Among other things this will mean:*

- equipping our young people with the critical skills necessary to evaluate the assumptions behind the values of individualism and consumerism
- assisting young people to examine the implications of these values for their own lives, community and the wider world

---

*As an organisation the YMCA is committed to “to supporting people in turning to God in Christ, and to express that faith in the tradition of their choice.*

*Our approach should respect the freedom of choice of the individual.”*

*(YMCA Cross-denominational statement)*

---

- we take responsibility when we get things wrong thus avoiding a culture of blame where others are put down or made scapegoats
- we are prepared to offer and receive forgiveness in our relationships where breakdowns of trust occur
- we are prepared to work for the good of others ahead of our own self-interests
- we actively challenge attitudes or behaviours which demean others
- we strive towards having integrity between our words and actions and being able to accept criticism where we fail to live up to what we set as standards
- we demonstrate the possibility of new or fresh starts in relationships
- we affirm the availability of assistance from God in helping to overcome or address difficulties or problems

### ***YMCA staff and volunteers will actively seek to promote a Christian world view and perspectives within the curriculum of services and programmes on offer***

As discussed earlier we must be ready to create an environment within our programmes with young people where the assumptions underpinning our increasingly “individualistic” and “consumerist” communities are at least

- introducing alternative values based on interdependency, sustainability and service to others

Alongside offering a different perspective on global issues to young people, volunteers and staff should also be encouraged to explore how the Christian values of the organisation can offer alternative perspectives on the many personal issues affecting young peoples lives such as substance misuse, relationships, racist or sectarian attitudes etc.

In introducing an alternative Christian perspective on these issues, volunteers and staff need to ensure that young people understand that these are not being imposed on them but rather they represent alternative perspectives that are worthy of further exploration.

In the final section of this article I want to explore how volunteers and staff can ensure that this challenging of the underlying assumptions behind much of contemporary culture is carried out in a way consistent with the anti-sectarian and inclusive Christian mission of the YMCA. Again some of this is developed further in YMCA Ireland’s Christian Emphasis Policy and Guidelines 2003.

### ***Recognising the Power of Practitioners***

It must be acknowledged that all staff and volunteers are in positions of authority and

consequently have considerable influence over young people who use YMCA services or programmes. It is therefore important that staff and volunteers are aware of this power and use it in line with professional ethical guidelines.

### Recognising Diversity

As has been documented elsewhere in this edition of INSIGHT the YMCA movement has been on a journey from homogeneity to diversity in relation to its understanding of its Christian mission.

Therefore as an inter-denominational Christian organisation, YMCA volunteers and staff will have

*"different understandings of the context of faith development. For many it is expressed as a new birth, conversion or becoming a Christian. For many others it is expressed as a re-awakening or renewal of communion in Christ which began at baptism"*<sup>5</sup>.

In the light of this it is important that staff/volunteers have an understanding of the variety of ways in which people within the YMCA have seen their Christian faith develop. As an organisation the YMCA cannot, nor does it endorse any one of these ways in which people have seen their faith develop. Therefore in assisting young people explore faith issues the variety of ways in which people have seen faith develop needs to be taken into account.

The personal experience of the staff/volunteer in relation to his/her own faith journey should not be seen as normative for all but as one example of how people can be supported in *"turning to God in Christ."*

### Recognising and Respecting Individual Choice

As an organisation the YMCA is committed to *"to supporting people in turning to God in Christ, and to express that faith in the*

*tradition of their choice. Our approach should respect the freedom of choice of the individual."* (YMCA Cross-denominational statement)

Where a young person as a result of contact with the YMCA wishes to further deepen their faith within the context of church involvement or membership, staff and volunteers have a responsibility to ensure that the young person is free to choose from a variety of local churches, including that church where the person may already have a nominal allegiance to/ or membership of.

Staff and volunteers must endeavour to make sure that they do not overly influence the young person in making this decision.

### Conclusion

*"If men are unable to perceive critically the themes of their time, and thus to intervene actively in reality, they are carried along on the wake of change. They see that the times are changing, but they are submerged in that change and so cannot discern its dramatic significance"*.

Faith based organisations, such as the YMCA, face unprecedented opportunities to present a radically different world view and lifestyle choices to today's generation of young people.

Within this context this is the challenge for the various stakeholders who make up the contemporary YMCA movement in local communities to explore what role each of them have to make sure that as an organisation we succeed in enabling this generation to understand and experience something of the Kingdom of God, its values and perspectives.

## Christian Emphasis policy

**YMCA Ireland's Christian Emphasis policy** has been developed against the backdrop of the following "Foundational Documents" Paris Basis, Kampala Principles, Anti-Sectarian statement, YMCA Ireland's Cross-Denominational Statement

The policy and accompanying set of guidelines attempt to translate the term *"extension of His kingdom"* (Paris Basis) into a language which is accessible and understood by those who make up the organisation today. They seek to set out a set of practical principles and guidelines which will assist them in applying the Christian Emphasis policy to practice.

### Our Christian emphasis policy

The following are the key elements of YMCA Ireland's Christian Emphasis policy: YMCA Ireland is committed to a Christian social action model which attempts to show Christ's love in practical ways to young people and others in need in our local communities

YMCA Ireland is committed to building a community of Christians that celebrates the diversity of Christian experience among its volunteers and staff

YMCA Ireland seeks to apply Christian values to all aspects of its work

The YMCA sees the Christian faith as a personal journey which takes place within the context of a wider faith community

### Our Shared Christian Values

The following values are seen as important in defining the distinctively Christian culture of the organisation:

We seek to be responsible stewards of the skills and resources entrusted to us by God

We seek to care for the physical environment entrusted to our care by God

We seek to promote the value of each person as uniquely created in God's image

We seek to be accountable to each other as members of Christ's body

We seek to develop relationships founded on integrity within the YMCA and which are based on trust, equality and interdependence

We recognise the interaction between body, mind and spirit in realising our God given potential

We seek to display styles of leadership based on service

We recognise our responsibility to challenge injustice and inequality in our communities

We recognise our responsibility to speak out for the voiceless in our communities.

### References

1. Noel Davis, 'Heart Gone Walkabout' Poems, Prayers, Line & Space
2. C S Lewis' Screwtape Letters
3. National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-7, Department of Education and Science
4. YMCA Ireland , Christian Emphasis Policy and Guidelines (2003) Appendix 8
5. YMCA Ireland's Cross Denominational Statement



# Caring for our staff and volunteers

By Stewart Morris & Gareth Johnston

*This article by Stewart Morris (Donegal YMCA) and Gareth Johnston (Chairperson of Personnel and Training Committee) looks at how the organisation's Christian ethos is reflected or should be reflected in the management, supervision and pastoral care of staff and volunteers.*

## INTRODUCTION

In addressing the issue of pastoral care, it is important that as professionals we have our **ANTENNAE** out sniffing the air. The environment of those with whom we work can include many health, social and personal issues that can very often cloud the way in which workers or volunteers contribute to an organisation. Appropriate pastoral care can make a real difference if offered in a sensitive way.

By using our **ANTENNAE**, we learn to be:

## AVAILABLE

Each one of us could be an off-line supervisor, a line manager, a co-ordinator or a colleague but the main point of relevance for the person in need of pastoral care is that

– We are **AVAILABLE**.

Whether working with a member of staff or a volunteer, if potentially to be involved in their pastoral care, the best way to develop a relationship is to be sensitive to the general pressures and potential stress points of their job / role. How we do this will depend on the nature of the work and the relationship that we foster. Some examples could be – keeping an open door policy, sharing the burden of a demanding event, effective use of one-to-ones. This will establish an 'alongside' aspect which will be beneficial to understanding the work. It also opens the possibility of accessibility apart from the supervision / colleagueship element of our role.

In each person's life, there will come a time of crisis. Not one of us knows what lies ahead for us in our personal lives. What stands to us in times of

crisis is that we have the foundation of good relationships. Family can mean that quality foundation for many but for some it may not. For those especially, but also for those who cannot cope with the crisis in the family set-up, it is to work colleagues that people very often turn as they are outside the situation and can bring some perspective in dealing with the crisis. Just being there for someone can often be the simplest but most effective action we can take.

---

*Quality management will always  
find a method that seeks to  
value the person rather than  
putting them down.*

---

## NORMAL

A crisis can send us all into a spin!! There is a potential for anyone listening to a litany of disaster to go over the top and respond with 'Oh, how awful!', 'How do you cope?', 'Send for the professional counsellor immediately!!', 'Can I organise a protest for you – it's so unfair!'. Better to go gently and listen in a normal and quietly reflective way. The victim certainly does not want you adding to the angst!

What is normal for each one of us will vary! For some of us, we may naturally say, 'I will pray for you'. For others, we may spontaneously invite someone for a cup of coffee or a meal. For yet others, we will tend to offer to do the

washing and ironing, rather than remain idle. Keep being yourself! Remember that should someone be terminally ill or have recently died, it is important to continue to mention the person's name rather than avoid all mention of the person as if they were never really valued by your colleague.

## TRUE

The YMCA, in common with other voluntary sector organisations, values work that is holistic, engaging body, mind and spirit. What a colleague presents with in terms of their condition may not be symptomatic of the true cause of their illness or anxiety. Physical conditions may mask psychological ones; stress at work may belie difficult situations at home. Who will speak to the underlying cause in these situations? At times, the colleague will speak themselves, given time and the right environment. Elsewhere it may fall to a supervisor, on- or off-line, to encourage a colleague to look at the whole picture. Care is, obviously, essential, but too often what is unsaid disables the potential for good in an organisation.

From the YMCA's point of view, a Christian emphasis challenges us to ensure good employment practices, not just in pastoral care, but also in equality and diversity, and yes, even in remuneration.

On a lighter note, making provision for fun moments in working relationships, whether at an office party or in other team-building exercises, may be the way in which open and honest discussion on staff morale can be introduced. It is important to value each member of the team and to be all-inclusive.

## ENERGETIC

It is important to recognise how well some of our colleagues show care for those who participate in our courses. There is no point in frustrating about situations of need – we must get on with taking action on others' behalf e.g. in tackling social services regarding welfare rights for those for whom we have a responsibility and from whom we have permission to use their personal details in furthering their cause.

A listening ear is of no relevance if we do not continue to care to the highest standard. Feedback regarding work review should not be delayed. Interest in further training that will benefit not only the worker/volunteer but also the organisation, should be followed up with rigour and enthusiasm. Such undertakings should not be left on the long finger and a colleague should have the evidence to hand of our genuine interest in them and their development.

## NON-INTRUSIVE

Permission was mentioned earlier. We need to safeguard the integrity and privacy of our colleagues unless there has been a breach of the law. In a more informal sense, we should seek to develop the skill of knowing when our opinion is not being sought! It's important, too, to consider what are our own motives: are they genuinely oriented toward addressing a problem which is affecting workplace performance, or has curiosity pushed its way in?

Quality management will always find a method that seeks to value the person rather than putting them down. Bullying or threatening behaviour in the workplace is not uncommon and is an extreme form of intrusion that is evident among colleagues in some situations. Always, we need to check out what is acceptable behaviour and we must avoid any extremes which link power and prejudice in relation to gender and race.

## NON-DIRECTIVE

Evaluation questions, reflective team moments, team goal-setting and one-to-one affirmations are better ways of seeking to enter into a colleague's quality world. Very often we can be tempted to order people around as an easier way of getting things done. However, if we encourage reflective practice, people begin to learn what is quality work and the team spirit is less likely to be eroded.

Encouraging such practice is one way of enabling colleagues to highlight for themselves what brings about chaos, conflict and coercion in their working life, which can lead to stress and take its toll on their health. Stress management is all about seeking to minimise what is unnecessary in the life of a working person and challenges our use of time and resources. Good time management will undoubtedly benefit our leisure and family pursuits and lead to a healthier lifestyle that could minimise crises and consequently the need for pastoral care.

Prevention is better than cure. Organisational practices that encourage a balanced life based on what we glean in a non-directive way through quality management will change the way we live.

## AMENABLE

Flexibility in working hours and practice allows an employer to earn the reputation of being caring. This is one aspect of what it means to be amenable. Very often, the need for pastoral care arises when a family cannot cope with trauma and on going work demands. If a worker has other things on their mind, they are not able to give of their best.

The demands of child rearing and parent caring at various stages of life's journey will bring their own stress. If we can recognise the inevitability of these stress points, we can reduce the need for crisis management and incorporate a more caring family-friendly approach to those in need.

Life offers very few moments of in-control time. However, if we build in to our work practices the opportunity to

plan more effectively for daily living as well as focusing in a healthy way on our work schedule, we will keep a perspective that will stand to us through every phase of life. Even in our work time, we could be renewed for service in the home!

## ENGAGING

There is nothing sexy about work! Or is there? If we as an organisation engage our staff and volunteers in life-style choices that benefit everyone, our work places become attractive. Basic needs have been described as survival, love/belonging, power, freedom and fun. If those needs are being met in the workplace, we will see a fulfilled staff. Everyone needs to be involved in the review of work practices, job descriptions and terms and conditions. If we do not feel empowered, we will be more likely to foster and suffer from stress. If we do not have fun at some stage in our working life, we will no longer feel that we belong. If we are not shown love and consideration, we will feel hemmed in and oppressed.

Each member of staff needs to engage in a process of self-improvement for the organisation. We all need each other. Whatever life deals us, coping mechanisms need to be there to get our back wheels out of the mud we are stuck in. Pastoral care is necessary for each crisis that we may face but, even more important, is an institution with caring practices that alienates nobody!

# YMCA, Church and Community

By Hugo Dale

*For many YMCA's, maintaining an outward and broader vision, in a time of huge financial competition – not to mention 'membership' competition, can be a struggle. However we are part of a 'community' and as such relationships often need to be nurtured and grown. In this article, Hugo Dale Director of Lurgan YMCA considers some of the dilemmas posed by local YMCA's when faced with the broader issues of church and community.*

Hugo has been the director of Lurgan YMCA for 4 years. Prior to his work with Lurgan, he had been employed as Programmes Director at Greenhill YMCA in Newcastle

## ***Can you briefly describe for us the type of work, which your YMCA is involved with?***

At Lurgan we have 3 centres. Two traditional 'drop-in' centres with afternoon and evening opening hours, as well as a Youth Information point based in the town centre. Approximately 150 young people would avail of these centres over a weekly period, aged mostly between 10 and 19 years, and who would fall into the 'at-risk' marginalised category. We also have a detached programme where we work on the street with young people who don't use centres, and who potentially may be at risk. Our programmes focus on community relations, health promotion, youth information and leadership as well as schools work. We also provide IT services both to young people as well as the wider public e.g. helping carers of young people provide safe Internet use in the home.

## ***How would you describe the faith aspect of the work within your local YMCA?***

The Christian Faith is at the root of the association, regardless of whether you are Protestant or Catholic, and as such our mission, values and policies reflect these Christian Principles. There is freedom for young people to explore the root of their faith, if they want to, no matter what side of the fence they come from. This may be a casual conversation with staff or volunteers, or it may be structured as part

of a programme whereby we have someone from the faith community answering questions posed by the young people themselves. However the young people choose to work out their faith is up to them – we offer the freedom to explore, regardless of background.

## ***How would you describe your relationship with the local churches?***

Put simply - Its like having a brother living in Australia, you think he is great, doing a great job, you say I must go and visit my brother sometime, but you never do take the time to visit and get to really know what he's doing.

I have contacted 17 of our local churches both by letter and by phone, four times since I took up post, to try and arrange meetings. In four years I have met two as a result of my request and one who wanted my help with a problem. Overall the Churches think we do a great job "with the young people" but they have no idea about what it is we do. This could be so easily resolved over a coffee, if only I could get a reply. I have had only two opportunities to speak at a church about our work, despite my efforts to do more. As an organisation who feels that they are a part of the 'Faith Community' this is a struggle for us.

Indirectly a lot of individuals who are members of local churches support us and have been involved with the YMCA over many years. This support has taken the form of fundraising, volunteering, management committee membership etc. which is very much appreciated.

## ***How important do you see building relationships with local churches to the work of the YMCA?***

I believe that it must be a two way relationship; they give us support and some of their time and we give them something that they value. That I think is core to developing a relationship between us. I believe that this is a relationship worth working at, and a goal of mine would be to approach them again to see if we can develop and foster an effective partnership – give me a couple of years and I'll let you know how I get on!

Part of my goal is to demonstrate to the churches that we are not a threat to them in relation to stealing all their good youth workers or all the young people. It is important that neither of us feel we own the issues – rather we should be working out joint strategies for the benefits of the community – each playing to their strengths. Many churches feel guilty that they don't touch the "un-churched Youth". To me the solution is simple, we do, embrace our mission, support us financially and with some volunteers and we will be better equipped to work with these young people. In return, we will offer to train their youth workers, offer strategic planning or even practical support with for example health & safety issues. I will even cut down their old trees for free. OK so I'm getting a bit excited, but I think that such a partnership could be a good deal for both.

## ***Where do you think the YMCA fits in the community, as a Faith organisation?***

It depends who you ask. Strong evangelical organisations probably think that because we don't evangelise, have large conversions and fill the local

churches with young people, that we are wishy-washy and meaningless, and probably bad for true faith development.

Other individuals probably think we are OK, or at least some of us are.

Some see us as a net to catch those who will never fit the current institutional church but that we enable these young people to explore, develop and grow in faith until they are strong enough to find their way and seek fellowship and support where they feel accepted.

Most secular organisations don't think, or care, about the faith issue that much. It is not always 'politically correct' to talk about it - but if young people are asking questions and struggling with 'faith' then who will support them? Even in some 'Y' circles, there is a certain element of having to be 'politically correct' - I know because I have experienced it.

In general, most people don't have a view of what happens to the young people on their doorsteps - so long as they stay out of their way and don't cause trouble. Many people wouldn't see the YMCA as being a faith organisation, but rather as a source to 'get young people out of the way'. It's funny though, how those same troublemakers that are out on the streets can visit our centres every day, be involved in many programmes and respond very maturely to issues, when presented by people who care.

#### ***How is faith relevant to the modern day YMCA and its youth work, if at all?***

Again personally speaking, if the YMCA does not address the faith issue with young people, it is no different than any other street corner youth club. Who wants to be involved with mediocre, no different from the rest?

If the YMCA does not address faith who is going to? You ask about the importance of the relationship between YMCA's and churches, what about the relationship between young people and churches??? We may not do church here at Lurgan, but we do address faith, God and church with young people at what ever level they want. In mainstream Youth Service work, this rarely happens. Faith development is a key part of youth development and therefore needs to be given equal status. It is for this reason that our mission at Lurgan is "A relevant Christian response to building Spirit, Mind & Body for all".

I guess multi faith will become the challenge of the future. However, I know I represent the view of both my Management Board and myself when I say that our focus is based on the principles set out by Jesus Christ. It's not about being a Christian, Jesus never commanded us to do Christian, he commands us to make and be disciples, followers, honest people who live out a social gospel on the street; that's where the YMCA in Lurgan stands.

#### ***Can you explain to us, whether or not you think your YMCA is a part of, and owned by the local community***

I think we are now very much part of the community as far as a community organisation goes. Over the past four years a lot of work has been carried out in this area and it is now paying off. Other agencies are now giving us recognition as a key player and in many areas leading the way. It is harder to gauge the local business community but we also inform them regularly of our activities and ideas, although recent involvement with the business of Lurgan has shown many support us. Some schools and many

parents are seeking our help and support. So yes I think we are part of the community but I would not say that we are necessarily 'owned' by the community.

#### ***What lessons have you learned about building relationships and bridges within the community?***

It is important to 'Get out there' and be a presence - attend community events and be part of the community.

Promote what you do and have a clear vision and strategy of what you aim to do. At all times be transparent with the community and address any blockages or broken bridges that may exist between your organisation and the community.

I feel it is important to be clear about your Christian vision and mission but don't 'be church'. Equally so, state your core values in relation to youth work practice and governance and ensure it reflects best practice. I have found by doing so the Association's Christian integrity has never been an issue.

I believe it is important to be aware of the issues that face the local community and the young people, and be prepared to work together on issues. Most of all be patient! I went to a local community meeting some time ago and came out thinking it was a waste of my time. However, because of my input in one of the sessions, the facilitator was extremely interested and complimentary about our work. Two years later she was making the final recommendation to a funding agency, and based on that one day, she was confident that we should get the money, all £75K; that meeting was a waste of time after all.

#### ***What would your vision for the YMCA and community be for the future?***

My vision would be that the YMCA in Lurgan would continue to stand firm in its mission and value base. That the "Spirit, Mind and Body" principles would be shared and owned by the wider community, that our values of respect, caring, responsibility and honesty would impact our youth as they grow and underpin how they interact within the community. As a movement, I hope we will be a strong movement, well known and respected within the island of Ireland for our work among children, young people and families and for our commitment to developing the "Spirit, Mind and Body" of all those that we work with.



# LISTENING AND LEARNING

By Cesca Tyrrell with Kitty Dullea and Mary McLean

*Over the past twenty years the YMCA as an organisation has devoted considerable energy and time to exploring how to become a truly cross-denominational movement. One of the processes which was used was a series of residential which allowed volunteers and staff from various parts of the organisation to meet and to reflect on their individual faith journeys. Out of this process came a cross-denominational statement which in a creative way attempts to do justice to the faith experiences of these people. This article by Cesca Tyrrell a staff person and two Co Cork volunteers, Kitty Dullea and Mary Mc Lean attempt to describe this journey.*

To achieve the goal of developing a common understanding of the YMCA as a cross-denominational movement, a group of about twelve YMCA staff and volunteers from north and south of the border, met for a series of residential workshops in 1995/6. The members of the group were drawn from a variety of denominations : Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Methodist, Presbyterian, Independent Evangelical Church, Elim Pentecostal, Baptist, Christian Fellowship Church and one who preferred not to be assigned a particular denomination.

We began by listening to one another and by learning one another's stories of faith and church experience.

## Listening to YMCA members across the denominations

Kitty Dullea

"Listening to radio and television interviews can never make the impact made by a personal encounter. That is what I recall most vividly from the first weekend of the Cross Denominational Workshops: meeting a young man who had lost his wife the mother of his baby daughter, in one of the horrific bombings of the Troubles. His personal account of the pain of this bereavement made me think that Catholics in the Republic had not reacted sufficiently in protest to the killings carried out by the IRA and that the Church's voice had not been loud enough. Listening first hand compelled me to consider my own response.

There was negative as well as positive learning. Never before had I realised that Roman Catholics could be so 'excluded' in

peoples' minds from belonging to God's family and their faith be so poorly regarded by some parts of Churches within the Protestant Church. I took heart from the fact that I myself was listened to and that I personally gained acceptance from a person who was a member of such a Church but I was saddened to know that, as a Catholic, I was probably no more than the exception that proved the rule.

---

*Listening to one other and spending time in open and honest communication built a foundation for genuine relationships.*

---

Listening to one other and spending time in open and honest communication built a foundation for genuine relationships. Some of these have continued grow and have provided me with practical encouragement and spiritual support as strong as any from within my own Church. This is one of the immense gains from that time."

We listened. Each person was given time to tell and to tease out their own story. We were encouraged to be open and honest and to share misgivings as well as triumphs, unease as well as ease with our own particular background or denomination. Some had suffered intense pain due to sectarian conflict and

violence. Others had endured rejection because of a newly found faith. Some had been born into their church and to some extent had acquired the involuntary likes and dislikes of their own background. Short cuts to superficial agreement were avoided. Later we were to challenge each other and to expose our prejudices, to question as well to listen. Barriers did not simply melt away. For this relationship building was paramount hence the time and space built into the residential meetings.

## Breaking down barriers

Mary McLean

"As a Catholic from the Republic I had not grown up with the concept of barriers. I had always been encouraged to have an open attitude and had never dwelt upon differences nor upon the relative merits or demerits of one denomination versus another. I had often attended services within the Church of Ireland and been involved in ecumenical prayer groups. What was somewhat unexpected was that our sessions were not designed to smooth out all the wrinkles nor to ignore difference. In a way the sharing of our faith stories and church experiences within the workshops challenged us to think more clearly and with more reality about the differences between us.

The process of listening to the other participants from both jurisdictions and in particular from the North of Ireland, helped me to understand the fears that create barriers between the different Christian denominations. The underlying fear is a fear of change. If we agree to

expose ourselves to others will we find that our own denomination begins to be influenced by some of their thinking and lose its distinctiveness or even the purity of its doctrine? If we take the risk of this kind of exploration might we find that our personal faith or even our traditional faith is cracked and flawed? It is so much simpler to keep apart and so protect ourselves from all that lies beyond.

The workshops also demonstrated that barriers are likely to stem from ignorance. It became apparent that we have a very confused picture of one another! Never before had I gained such an insight into how others see us. I realised that the Protestant participants largely assumed that we Roman Catholics were worshippers of the statues with which we adorn our churches. On the other hand I had never understood that the Protestant Church has continued to divide and divide into so very many segments and that these- much to my surprise are not necessarily able to trust each other at all!

Participation in this project, however, led us to trust one another and resulted in the formation of lasting friendships across denominations. For some this was a completely new experience. Barriers were removed through having courage to share at a personal level, listening carefully and acquiring new levels of understanding. Although I was sad that not all had reached a position of fully accepting the other's way of worship and each other's church, there was a strong sense that changes had begun and that they would not end with the end of the group.

The process included an opportunity to ask a question on something that has always been confusing or irritating about another denomination. The answers to these questions provided both explanations and clarifications, which I personally prefer to think of as 'revelations' because I found these to be amongst most releasing moments of the workshops. Having permission to name a suspicion brings relief.

Naming it to someone who shares your point of view usually consolidates existing prejudice. Naming it to the 'suspect' however opens a new door and brings the possibility that the whole issue will be defused and resolved. Listening to the

answer invariably brings new insights and hence our perception of the issue is almost certain to change.

At last I could ask about the apparent nuisance factor of those innumerable saints in Roman Catholicism who had long offended my Protestant perception of how to petition God. Suffice to say that the answers got me thinking and that I am still thinking and no longer 'switched off' whenever they are named!

As we came to know one another, acceptance began to take the place of suspicion and we also experienced a growing rather than a diminished confidence in our own home territory of faith. Only then did we begin to work on a Statement or rather a series of statements to report our findings. We spent some hours deliberating on the essence of what it meant for each of us to be Christians, a hard question! To our amazement we found ourselves in complete unanimity when it came to a written statement.

We looked back to the foundation of our movement and discovered that we could frame no better statement than the

familiar words of the Paris Basis

"The YMCA seeks to unite those who, regarding Jesus Christ as their God and Saviour, according to the Holy Scriptures, desire to be His disciples in their faith and life, and to associate their efforts for the extension of His Kingdom.

**Any differences of opinion on other subjects, however important in themselves, shall not interfere with the harmonious relations of the YMCA Movement.**

We then went on to summarise our learning in the Cross Denominational Working Group statement. We named the particular conclusions we had reached about difference on the one hand and the opportunities this should afford on the other: opportunities to celebrate and explore difference within the movement as a whole. We parted with sadness since we had grown together but also with hope for the future of our movement.

Looking back on this process I deem it to have been a great privilege to be one of those who were invited to make this very unique journey.

## Cross Denominational Working Group Statement

### Cross Denominational Differences

We recognise that as Christians in the YMCA we have different understandings of the context of faith development. For many it is expressed as a new birth, conversion or becoming a Christian. For many others it is expressed as a re-awakening or renewal of communion in Christ which began at baptism.

While recognising our differences, we are committed together to supporting people in turning to God in Christ, and to express that faith in the tradition of their choice. Our approach should respect the freedom of choice of the individual.

### YMCA as a Cross Denominational Movement

We have become aware of our differences in the YMCA and we celebrate this diversity.

We affirm the validity of each other's membership of both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

We acknowledge the value and diversity of different expressions of Christian worship and suggest that the use of language from different traditions should be discussed and explored in the YMCA.

We would like to encourage members of YMCAs to share from and explore the wealth of different traditions involved in the Movement.

# Journeys Into the Unknown

## Personal journeys from Hedley Abernethy, Helen Jary and Geraldine Stinton

*Is it possible to grow and learn from our place of employment? Or is work just a job? We asked three people to tell us 'their story' outlining their involvement with the YMCA.*

Hedley Abernethy is a past member of staff who has recently emigrated with his wife to America. Prior to moving he had been employed with YMCA Ireland for a number of years, mostly with the Community Relations Team.

### What Am I Doing Here?

Okay, before we drift off into overly complicated discourses on existentialism, let me explain the question 'What Am I Doing Here?'

I do not believe that my being part of the YMCA movement in Ireland was an accident. As a Methodist I am pretty sure it was also not predestined! However, my life and faith journeys made my move into the YMCA inevitable. As a youth worker, I have spent time with young people who are utterly dissatisfied with their lives as they struggle with university courses they do not want to be in or employment they find difficult to get out of. Their common cries are that it seemed a good idea at the time or, even more commonly 'My parents wanted me to do it.' I also have adult friends (not many but some) who would be very honest and say that the only reasons they are in their particular line of work is that 1) it is all they can do and 2) they get paid. Throughout my thirteen years in the Civil Service, BETA was a popular acronym. BETA – Brown Envelope Theory Applies. In other words, do not let your work distract you from the fact that you would get paid at the end of the month. In fact, it was the only thing that kept me going sometimes.

The YMCA was different for me. I not only enjoyed working for the organisation. I also enjoyed being part of it. We had a good relationship.

Many of us know what it is to experience good relationships. What is it though that

is the bedrock of these relationships that makes them 'good'? I think there must be something about similar worldviews. Being in the United States last year, prior to the Presidential elections in November 2004, was a very interesting experience. The majority of people I met were voting for the Democratic nominee John Kerry. In fact, I did not meet too many people who were voting for, George W. Bush. However, as Virginia has traditionally been a Republican stronghold, I think that says more about the circles within which I was moving, rather than the fact that nobody was voting for Bush. As news of his re-election spread across the world, this reality was highlighted.

---

*Christian social action is not wishy washy. It is dynamic and seeks to ensure we live in a world free from violence, injustice and inequity. Second, faith is always bigger than denomination.*

---

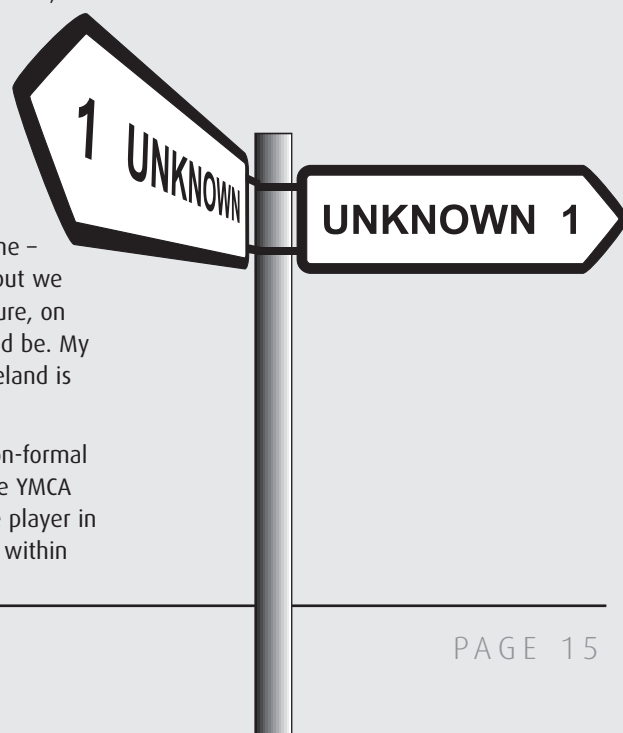
The point is this. I, and many like me, tend to gravitate to where we feel comfortable when it comes to values and how we feel the world should be run. When I consider my closest relationships, especially those I have chosen, like my wife and friends, there is a recurring theme – we may disagree on the detail but we always agree on the bigger picture, on how we believe the world should be. My relationship with the YMCA in Ireland is typical of this.

I chose to go into the field of non-formal education as a youth worker. The YMCA has proved that it is an effective player in this field although many people within

the organisation either do not know that or simply do not use those words. If there was one thing I hoped I did during my time with National Council, it was simply to ask people the question – "Why do you do what you do?" If your only motivation for working with this organisation is the pay cheque, could I suggest you consider leaving now? Maybe even get a job in the Civil Service ...

The YMCA is not loaded with people simply there for the money. I do believe the YMCA has an integrity that attracts people with integrity. I do not believe these people just stumble into the organisation. I certainly did not. I was not head hunted (Hed hunted?). However, I was approached (how sinister does that sound?) about a job opportunity within the organisation and was encouraged to apply. Apply I did and never once looked back. I believe there was mutual choice in this particular relationship. I chose as much as I was chosen.

This is where it gets difficult though. Do I really want a bunch of Hedley's in the organisation? Do we want to perpetuate a philosophy throughout the movement of being 1) a wishy washy liberalism and 2)



watery Protestantism, the latter being a phrase I have certainly heard being used within the organisation.

Let me nail those two pejoratives by making one assertion – the YMCA was and continues to be a faith based organisation that lives up to the teachings of Jesus Christ. First, Christian social action is not wishy washy. It is dynamic and seeks to ensure we live in a world free from violence, injustice and inequity. Second, faith is always bigger than denomination. (Has anyone noticed how close the spelling of the word ‘denomination’ is to the spelling of ‘domination’?) I cannot be in a place that only discusses the social gospel in Protestant theology or only the evangelical gospel in Protestant theology. I am also not able to be in a place that discusses neither. Tell me everything, and then let me ‘work out my salvation in fear and trembling.’

This is why I was part of the YMCA. (Not withstanding the fact that I was an exceptional youth worker of course. This is a serious article, so no sniggering if you please.) I was part of an organisation that helps me work through what is both fundamental and essential in my faith. In other words, it gave me a grounding and foundation for my faith as well as the space and time to discuss, to wrestle with and to transform matters of faith. Did I ever get frustrated? You bet. I got fed up with people who treated their young people like lumps of flesh that had to be ‘saved.’ I got annoyed with people who simply saw their young people as opportunities to number crunch to either keep their own jobs or to expand their operation. I despaired when good-hearted people did sterling work but could never tell me why they were doing it.

As I often said, that probably says more about me than it did about these individuals. However frustrated I may have got, I valued every person I met and their contribution to the work of the YMCA, sometimes in very frightening and difficult circumstances. Let me say this without fear of contradiction – there are people within the YMCA that have changed my life. Now that I am out of the organisation, I miss it and I miss these people. However, wherever I am, I take the YMCA with me along with everything it has taught me about my work and my faith. For that I am eternally grateful.

The second ‘story’ has been written by Helen Jary, who was employed firstly as Step Co-ordinator in Ballincollig, and then as well as PAKT Coordinator. In her final year with the YMCA, she was employed as Co Cork General Secretary.

## I’m an Alien

*“I’m an alien, I’m a legal alien, I’m an Englishman in New York.”* Sting’s song speaks about cultural diversity and entreats people to, “be yourself.” I spent a total of 11 years as an ‘Englishwoman in Cork’, and I can say that being a ‘legal alien’ is actually a lot of fun! It is also a considerable opportunity for growth. In 1992 as I stood at a bus-stop in Ballincollig, not understanding a single word that an old man was saying (I just nodded and smiled!), I couldn’t have imagined that I was at the beginning of a journey which has impacted me personally, and spiritually, more than I can say.

*...following Jesus is about so much more than preaching the message of Salvation, it is about the extension of the Kingdom of God – that place where God rules and reigns.*

From the spiritual point of view, working with the YMCA in Co. Cork has changed my outlook. I arrived in Ballincollig with a limited ‘Salvationist theology’. ‘Becoming a Christian’ or ‘being saved’ was the be-all and end-all. The experiences that I had and the people that I encountered, not least the members of the County Cork YMCA Advisory Groups, led me to an understanding of ‘Kingdom Theology’. I still believe that it is important for us to understand the gospel message. We need to individually respond to the God who has sent His son to rescue us, enrich our lives and lead us to wholeness. However, following Jesus is about so much more than preaching the message of Salvation, it is about the extension of the Kingdom of God – that place where God rules and reigns.

What are some of the things that we know about the Kingdom of God? It is the place where “...the last will be first” (Mt. 20:16), the good news is preached, broken-hearts are bound up, the captives are freed (Isaiah 61:1) and the sick are healed (Mt. 4:23). It is the place where the individual, who may be the least in the eyes of the world, is seen, sought after, and loved (Mt. 18:12-13).

During the years that I spent working with the YMCA in Ireland, I saw these Kingdom values being worked out. Young people, volunteers and staff were affirmed and encouraged to realise their potential. As necessary they were challenged to address the ‘sickness’ of unhealthy attitudes and habits, and were empowered by new tools/information which enabled them to make decisions and bring about change in their lives. Volunteers gave up their time to draw alongside young people, many of whom had been labelled by their communities as ‘trouble-makers’, ‘under-achievers’ or simply, ‘difficult’. In both prayerful and practical ways, they gave freely of themselves – the Kingdom of God in action.

In business, standards are imposed that profit-margins may increase. In the Irish YMCA, standards were negotiated and agreed by the broadest possible cross-section of young people, volunteers, workers and managers. The result was that the distinct Christian emphasis, and ‘Kingdom emphasis’, of the YMCA was underlined and will be maintained. It was a privilege to be a part of that process.

All of this is evidence of YMCA Ireland’s holistic approach to faith. It is an approach that, over time, I have come to share. Jesus was interested in much more than people’s spiritual needs. He was also concerned about their physical, emotional and social needs. It is well illustrated in his encounter with a man who had leprosy.

*A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man, “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cured of his leprosy.*

(Mt. 8:2-3)



Jesus' concern is for the whole person, why else would he have reached out and touched the leper, a man who had been denied all forms of human contact, when he could have healed him by a word?

One of the most significant realisations of my time in Ireland was that there is both richness in diversity, and a special blessing in unity. As Christians of different traditions come together, God moves in ways that are beyond our denominational understanding. We come to realise that He's broader and deeper than we'd ever imagined, but also that those things which unite us are so much stronger than the things which can divide.

*There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.*

(1 Cor 12:4-6).

Achieving 'togetherness in diversity' does not come easily. It requires an ongoing commitment to honesty, openness and love for one another. It also requires us to be prepared to challenge our own thinking and our assumptions in the light of what we learn from each other. This can be a painful and uncomfortable process but I am glad that it is one that the Irish YMCA did not shy away from, and has remained committed to. I remember retreat days in which we set aside time, as YMCA staff and volunteers from different Christian traditions, to discuss our understanding of matters like 'becoming a Christian' or 'how spiritual growth takes place'. I entered into the process fearing that my own faith could become 'watered down'. I emerged from the process as one whose faith and understanding had been enriched.

I can identify a specific time and place when I made a conscious decision to seek to live life as a follower of Jesus. I now recognise that it is not that way for everyone. I often recount a helpful analogy which was given at a YMCA Ireland National Assembly, a gathering which took place in Newcastle, Co. Down.

*A man got up very early, while it was still dark, and sat outside. As he watched, the sky began to lighten and he was aware that, within a short period of time, the*

*sun would rise and a new day would begin. As the moment approached when the sun would eventually break the horizon, the sight became ever more glorious. At this point, he decided to fetch a friend so that he too may share in the experience. They both returned to witness the finale – the landscape bathed in the beautiful light of the emerging sun.*

Both men 'saw the light' but for the first, it was a dawning reality which took place over time. For the second, the fullness of the sunrise was seen and appreciated in an instant. We arrive at a realisation of the truth of the gospel message in different ways, and over different periods of time, but the journey continues for us all, as we seek to live out kingdom values and to grow in the knowledge of God.

Although I have now returned to England I have brought some Irish spiritual and cultural heritage with me. This works itself out in different ways; from a new commitment to cross-denominational activities to, last Sunday (the day of the all Ireland hurling final), in all likelihood being the only person in Norfolk wearing a Cork GAA jersey!

For Sting, one characteristic of a legal alien was that, "You can hear it in my accent when I talk." My accent was different to the majority of people in Cork but I never felt like an outsider. On the contrary, I was embraced by both the local community and the Irish YMCA movement, and I am a different person for it.

Our final account is from Geraldine Stinton, who has had several encounters with YMCA over the years. At present she is currently employed by YMCA Ireland and has spent 2 years with the Family Youth Work Department, more recently moving to the Community Relations Team.

## Y ME!

Everything happens for a reason! As journeys go mine at the YMCA has been eventful. Over the years I have worked there, I have got married, had 3 children, graduated from university, met my genuine life time friend and friends, visited lots of countries, met so many interesting and different people, hopefully impacted on a few lives as many have impacted on mine and encountered life and death along the way. I know that there many people who can say they

*through regular sharing and discussion with many people within the association I began to feel more confident about living a Christian life, adding to and not taking away from my faith by learning and growing from others.*

have had a similar path - I suppose it all impacts on us in our own unique way. I have loved it.

Every crossroads in life as we all know, means choices to be made, decisions to be taken and consequences some positive and some not so good to be dealt with. The older I get, the greater my desire to look back and try to reassess some of the things I got up to – even though I know that what's been said has been said and what's been done has been done. In the immortal words of that great anthropologist, 'Regrets I've had a few but then again too few too mention'. I thought it got easier as you got older and that adults had all the right answers – how did I get that one wrong!!

The first part of my life that took on board the YMCA began in 1989, when I

came on placement from Jordanstown and began working as a student in City Of Belfast YMCA on a new programme called STEP. My knowledge of YMCA Ireland like many young people from West Belfast was non-existent. I'd sang the song, did (and still do) the dance, but I never thought for one second that there was anything of any relevance or substance to what the YMCA was about.

I couldn't help but be struck by the Christian ethos of this organisation. The literature told me it was Christian, the staff and volunteers said they were Christian and prayer time was an important and constantly debated subject. However, what brought me back when I finished Jordanstown was the STEP programme. This was something I wanted to be a part of – for me this was a genuinely caring and challenging course for young people – epitomising a true Christian approach to life and our relationships with other people based on the teachings of Jesus. The fact that it was a Christian organisation didn't figure I was Roman Catholic and very clear about living out my faith was that not Christian enough?

I found however, the Christian ethos for some people, was not quite that simple. For some people the Christian ethos was one way only – their way. Rather than accepting or making an effort to understand diversity, there was a begrudging tolerance of the Roman Catholic faith and of me. I will stress that there were those from the outset for whom this did not apply – it's a bit like a box of liquorice - full of all sorts with layers of mistrust, ignorance, and fear and then some really juicy, tasty bits that surprised me but made everything worthwhile.

During the early period of my work within the movement, I felt different and confused. Different because I was a young woman from a working class Roman Catholic background in an organisation where there were no other Roman Catholic working class females. Confused because all my life I was led to believe that being a Christian was not complicated and that it was as much if not more about what we did as what we said. My experiences of some people within the YMCA was that there were those who appeared to want

to be masters of the Scriptures using the word of God as a stick instead of letting the Scriptures guide them through their lives. Through my early experiences, I felt in some kind of competition, to be judged only by God but already being judged by those who believed that if they bamboozled me with Scripture that they held the higher ground and I was in trouble!!

There were also those who made it worth the journey. Coming from Catholic West Belfast I had had few opportunities to find out about the Protestant faith. I had friends whom I had gone to college with but religion wasn't talked about. I got to know people who passionately lived out their faith. I had some absolutely cracking conversations with friends from the

*...it's a bit like a box of liquorice - full of all sorts with layers of mistrust, ignorance, and fear and then some really juicy, tasty bits that surprised me but made everything worthwhile.*

movement in all sorts of places, walking up the Mourne in the dead of night and sitting in minibuses, aeroplanes and cars where I learned and am still learning about others and the strength of conviction that faith brings with it.

While growing up, my faith was always something that was very personal to me. I remember going regularly to confession and strongly (and rather naively) believing that when I came from confession that my soul was like a mirror, where Jesus could feel at home and direct me in my life – I loved that feeling. Going to the YMCA at first made me question where I was at – was I truly Christian enough - I couldn't quote passage for passage from the Bible, I prayed quietly and meditatively, I sang different songs and prayed other prayers as well. But through regular sharing and discussion with many people within the association I began to feel more confident about living a Christian life, adding to and not taking away from my faith by learning and

growing from others.

The YMCA was then and is now made up of some of the most genuine caring people I know. I have met some truly Christian people who say what they mean and act on what they believe and it's those people who reflect for me what it means to be Christian. Like any organisation the YMCA is made up of us people – with all our faults and failings, talents and abilities, strengths and weaknesses. We all bring our baggage – our good experiences and the not so good.

Coming back into the movement after 6 years I have found a tremendous strength in the diversity of people involved and a greater willingness to work closely with each other finding more things that bind

us rather than creating craters for those things that make us that little bit different from one another.

I continue to find a renewed energy for my own faith, which is supported within the YMCA and more importantly an opportunity to help my children to come to an understanding of the importance of a Christian faith in their lives.

I have days when I question and query things however, I no longer feel confused or different but very much a part of this movement.

# The place of 'Heart and Justice' within YMCA work

By Gef Dickson

*Gef Dickson, General Secretary of Cork YMCA, recently completed a distance learning module on Values and Ethics through the George Williams YMCA College. In this article, Gef shares some of his personal learning and reminds us of the need for passion and justice in our work with young people.*

Over the past while a number of trends and developments in the youth sector and consequently in the YMCA have given me food for thought. While acknowledging that we are doing some great work as reflected in practitioners' conferences and in Insight- our reflective practice journal, maybe it's time to reflect on what the YMCA is ultimately about.

Some of these trends in the sector include professionalisation and "curriculumisation". If these were just about quality and standards they would be no bad thing. Unfortunately, in my view, they do carry with them some dangerous baggage.

**Thus embracing these developments can lead to:**

- The adoption of the jargon and world-views associated with the market place
- Emphasis on self protection
- The disappearance of the Christian concept of vocation in favour of qualifications and career development
- The constant targeting of need. In the traditional business model: we define /create need; supply appropriate product and keep on creating need/ supplying product

Os Guinness, in "Dining with the Devil" states

*"...meeting human needs not only results in a shallow identification of the nature of the human predicament but leads to an escalation of demands that eventually overwhelm."*

These tendencies have the potential to squeeze the **heart** out of our work and put us at risk of losing something precious.

## Ethical Approaches

In trying to ascertain exactly what we are in danger of losing, I turned to ethics and values, to reflect on if and how the YMCA was losing touch with its value base however that is defined.

In the YMCA we have a variety of views on what that value base is and of late we have been making some attempts to come to a common understanding of it. Instinctively we find it easier to talk about methodologies and in my experience we often confuse the two. But that is perfectly understandable because nailing down values is difficult! But I'd like to suggest briefly what kind of thinking currently informs what we do and how we do it!

**Kantian Ethics** in a professional context tends to focus on respect for and promotion of the autonomy of the service user and would stress principles such as maintaining confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, not acting in a stigmatising or discriminatory manner or offering misleading or untruthful information.

For Kant, any action which violated the principle of respect for persons would be morally wrong – regardless of whether it resulted in an outcome which could be regarded as beneficial. For example, if a youth worker lied to a threatening father about the whereabouts of his son, this would be regarded as wrong, regardless of the fact that the lie was told to protect the young man from being beaten up. (Banks 1999)

**Utilitarian Ethics** sees maximising pleasure (or in a number of cases, reducing harm or displeasure) as the ultimate good. In other words, when

facing choices of how to act, the utilitarian would predict the consequences of each possible action and choose the one which would lead to the maximum total happiness in the world. Utilitarianism provides strong arguments for equality.

Utilitarianism is also impartial. It is unimportant whether you know the person; you should make two strangers happy, rather than your grandmother. This seems counter- intuitive: we are more likely to feel it is right to look after grandmother first!

It could also be said to be an egalitarian theory in that the pleasure of everyone is of equal value. So ethical decisions should be made which make two poor, powerless people happy rather than one rich, powerful person.

Much of the informal sector is shaped and informed by these Ethical Schools.

Any school of **Christian Ethics** seems to borrow heavily from the above but dress them up in different clothes. Kant it must be acknowledged drew heavily on his own Christian beliefs which had a strong absolutist underbelly.

However, another school of thought which I'd not come across before but which struck a resonance is the school of **Virtue Ethics** which I'd like to devote a few lines to.

Virtue ethics, although rooted in the works of classical Greek philosophers, Aristotle in particular, is relatively new to mainstream ethics. This school of thought differs from the others because it focuses more on the **qualities of the person doing an action than on the act itself or its consequences.**

This emphasis on the actor rather than the act makes it an especially interesting perspective for educators. For many, the exercise of true virtue is an exercise of the power of the soul ; this is so because a virtue is that by which one acts well, and every act is from the soul; a virtue disposes one toward the best. will is the subject of virtues.

Thus Heather Smith argues that we can characterise the Virtue Ethics perspective in terms of the questions the followers of a Virtue Ethics approach might ask in order to decide whether they were acting ethically eg

The “Kantian” educator asks: ‘What act must I perform in order to do my *duty*?’

The “utilitarian” educator asks: ‘What will the *consequences of my actions be*?’

The “virtue ethicist” educator asks: ‘What kind of *person do I want to be*?’

The presence of virtue in people is not simply about their acts, but the deliberation behind them. A person can engage in a virtuous act without being virtuous: the important point to consider is ‘*how our actions should be performed*’.

Alisdair MacIntyre identifies that a genuinely virtuous agent acts on the basis of true and rational judgement, not because of any training they may have been given. Exercising virtue demands choice or judgment:

*“the exercise of the virtues requires therefore a capacity to judge and to do the right thing in the right place at the right time in the right way. The exercise of such judgment is not a routinizable application of rules.”* (MacIntyre 1985:150)

However, this notion of a set of virtues raises the possibility of conflict between ‘right actions’ motivated by different specific virtues: *charity may prompt us to kill a person who is truly better off dead, yet justice forbids it. Honesty may require us to tell someone the truth no matter how devastating, yet compassion may call on us to be silent.* (Hursthouse 1999:43).

Virtue ethics thus offers a way of thinking about moral dilemmas which takes account of the humanity of those who have to make hard choices, and of the

people affected by them.

Heart and “character” (the kind of people we want to be) seem to me to go hand in hand . So what do we value at the heart of our YMCA work ? Most of us seem better able to respond to the question “What is at the heart of the YMCA for you ?” than “ What do you consider to be the core values of the Irish YMCA ?” For me and for others a Christian youth organization, like the YMCA needs to bring together heart and emotions, values and Christian discipleship.

### Too much Shifting Sand

For any Christian community to grapple successfully with the basic concepts of Virtue Ethics there is possibly too much that is nebulous which requires a huge amount of working through on day by day basis; for most of us that is too impractical ! What is also needed is a platform on which to build - one which

it gets easier once you grasp his key concepts and approach!)

Gilman contends that the basic Christian values set out in his book are compelling because they appeal not only to objectivist but also particularist “strategies” of justification.

His values are love, peace and justice which he describes as elemental and holistic (Peace in the context of YMCA work might be more usefully redefined as “Reconciliation”): all other values in the Christian life hang on these. They are also comprehensive in that they embrace all other virtues as elaborated by Paul in Philippians 2 and in Galatians 5 (humility, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, fidelity, tolerance, self-control). Paul’s classic text in 1 Corinthians 13 obviously has a claim to containing the seminal values of Christianity viz. Faith, love and hope. In the context of a faith-based organisation we could take Faith as a

---

*Ensuring we are heart-centred rather than purely programme driven is a delicate balancing act requiring not just the right forms of training but also character building activities and a strong sense of community.*

---

has a measure of consensus and therefore inspires confidence.

Before building this platform we need to ask a critical question ‘*does the YMCA see itself as a faith community or as a service provider ?*’

The service provider mentality leads all too easily into the trap of professionalism and is therefore to be resisted at all costs: modern societies are serviced societies, “peopled with service producers and service consumers”.

If we consider ourselves to be a faith community (and everything I’ve heard of late within the YMCA would suggest this is what we want to be !) then James Gilman’s work, “Fidelity of Heart” is a very useful launching pad for us. (I should warn that Fidelity of Heart is by no means an easy work but worth persevering with-

given , underlying everything else. Hope, I feel, is adequately accounted for in Gilman’s approach outlined later.

Gilman argues for a covenantal approach to Love where obedience and emotions are taken into account. **Obediental dispositions and Empathic emotions are central to Gilman’s analysis of values : they accommodate the Divine command, the action itself and the emotional components. In order to practice love, certain dispositions need to be cultivated viz humility, intimacy and vulnerability. (Fidelity of Heart P46-53).**

These have particular relevance to the debate on professionalisation because established professions wield a great deal of power in modern society; they have for example the power to tell you what you need and claim the power to “prescribe”.



A serious danger for a Christian organisation like the YMCA is that the power of the Christian life could be usurped by the power of the profession! Another possible danger is that the imperative of professional “distance” keeps the “client” in the place of knowing clearly who is “being serviced”. Both run counter to the spirit of humility and vulnerability. To put it a nutshell “bringing hope to families fragmented by social pressures, fostering community in a day plagued by economic and racial divisions, nourishing the spirit in an age of materialism, recovering the wholeness of our sexuality in an age that exploits sexual imagery.. are long-term tasks that Christians cannot pursue if their image of themselves is invulnerability, success and minimal risk” ( Birch: “To love as we are loved” ).

The Empathic emotions that should accompany Love are Joy and Sorrow (ibid. P54-58). It is in this fashion that Gilman treats each of his fundamental values. Thus for Justice the obediential dispositions are responsibility and remembrance and the empathic emotions, holy anger, gratitude and mercy; while for Peace the obediential dispositions are faithful loyalty, loving kindness and hope and the empathic emotions mercy and generosity.

To summarise succinctly: we need to train ourselves in the exercise of values and also to cultivate the heart.

### Community as the locus for the exercise of Virtue and Values

Since values are exercised through this combination of dispositions and emotions the context in which this happens becomes crucial. The YMCA is a particular youth organisation with a unique history seeking to fulfil its mandate in a new social context and environment. The Paris Basis seeks principally to **unite** Christians and also offers a not very clearly defined mandate for social action as we interpret it today. The Kampala Principles primarily address issues of relationship rather than social task/mission. What Kampala offers is the framework for creating a community where space and freedom are offered to individuals to “work out their own salvation ” and to reflect on their

*practice in the light of agreed values. It can be no surprise that this type of community experience is what each YMCA is keen to offer the young people who come through its doors: this is simply because YMCA staff and volunteers highly value this kind of environment for themselves.*

**The aspiration for creating community has cropped up time and again in focus groups and other fora, often expressed in terms such as;**

*“time for relationships”,*

*“honesty in communication”,*

*“inclusivity”,*

*“respect”,*

*“Community is a set of relationships based on the principles of equality and trust based on Jesus’ teaching”,*

*“to create a sense of belonging and being valued”,*

*“we view young people as whole and allow them to explore body, mind and Spirit”.*

The values of Justice and Reconciliation will require that those who do not share our Christian faith context are not excluded but actively encouraged to participate in this endeavour. This will create many tensions and difficulties but these are not reasons for refusing to effect this vision: after all Jesus had among his followers many who were curious, many who were critical, many who misunderstood etc.

The acceptance and embedding of these core values will have many implications for us at local and national levels. For instance Justice may require us to think seriously about the balance between programmes and campaigning. Also do we campaign too much for our own cause rather than that of the young people who come to us? Should, for example, some of our PR activities be devoted to young people’s issues? If our PR promotes only our own cause are we being true to our mission? Justice, of course, can take many guises and offering a second chance to young people is certainly one of those. These are just a few of the challenges

---

*“bringing hope to families fragmented by social pressures, fostering community in a day plagued by economic and racial divisions, nourishing the spirit in an age of materialism, recovering the wholeness of our sexuality in an age that exploits sexual imagery.. are long-term tasks that Christians cannot pursue if their image of themselves is invulnerability, success and minimal risk”*

---

We seem to place a similarly high value on Justice as evidenced again by aspirations like : offering a second chance; realising potential; speaking for the voiceless; challenging inequality.

Thus building social capital within YMCAs based on mutual respect using various staff focused settings (supervision, work review, staff meetings, reflective practice groups etc) to reflect on how core values are being applied is one way to enhance the sense of community and to embed agreed values.

that will face us if we see Justice as one of our core values.

Ensuring we are heart-centred rather than purely programme driven is a delicate balancing act requiring not just the right forms of training but also character building activities and a strong sense of community.

# Times they are a-changing

## A conversation.....

*The following “conversation” attempts to highlight some of the current dilemmas faced by Christians in the YMCA as they attempt to grapple with the interplay between faith, culture and politics in a post-modern world. This article is included in the hope that it will help to highlight issues that will lead to an honest and open debate about the role of faith in contemporary Ireland.*

### INTRODUCTION

Sometimes outside observers have looked at the YMCA and questioned where it sits theologically.

Has this generation of YMCA workers forgotten the original Christian principles?

Has the organisation’s commitment to community relations work eroded its Christian emphasis?

Has professionalism replaced spiritual commitment?

The following are excerpts from a conversation between two YMCA staff, discussing the changes in the organisation and its Christian ethos over the last 20 years.

The YMCA is a community of Christian people from different denominations. Its local associations are autonomous and diverse. Therefore it is difficult to talk about a single YMCA view, however this article tries to trace some general changes in attitude particularly within the Northern Irish experience. This conversation attempts to reflect, in very simple terms, the dilemmas and tensions that most Christian organisations are going through and looks at how they have impacted on the YMCA movement.

### THE CONVERSATION

Christians, particularly protestants in Northern Ireland have had to come to terms with some harsh realities over the last 30 years. What do you think has been the outcome of that experience?

The conflict situation in Northern Ireland, has resulted in a slow rate of change within church and faith thinking. The particular mix of theology, politics and culture has acted as a double bind for individuals resulting in some very conservative Church thinking.

When some Christians started to try and change things, a double loyalty needed to be breached, and for those who changed, the effort to get over the threshold, propelled them to much bigger ideas. It has also meant, it was difficult for them to feel at home with those who were not shifting at all.

Community Relations thinking meant accepting a lot of their cultural values were questionable or wrong and this inevitably spread into their view of Church thinking and their personal theology. This process for some in the YMCA has led them to ask the question what is truth?

Another issue for many Christians is dealing with their new mixed feelings for their culture. For many their birth culture is one they now feel guilty and shameful about and yet denying how it influences their current world-view is fruitless.

Evangelical Christians have probably struggled most with this change, what have been the big dilemmas for them?

Evangelicals often resist the idea that culture has impacted on their presentation of faith, but in Northern Ireland it is evident that evangelicalism has been shaped by culture. Accepting this reality has caused disillusionment among many. Secondly, evangelicals have a strong belief in absolute truths, accepting there have been wrongs or even ambiguities within Church teaching or practice has caused further confusion. Evangelicals have strong adherence to a reformed faith interpretation of scripture, embracing wider interpretations has felt that the very foundations of one’s faith are unsteady.

Community Relations work and Ecumenicalism has dismantled many long held truths. I think this has probably had a major affect on people’s theology as well.

While many have moved from a position of believing ‘we have the truth’ to one where ‘they have truth as well’, many have still not reconciled the full implications of living with and reconciling these polar positions.

Of course this has coincided with very rapid changes in culture, education and the growth of post modern thinking, so other dynamics have been at work.

### WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

The intrusion of television and popular cultural media has infiltrated traditional cultures. It has not only affected lives but also the ways we talk about our lives. Today it is not uncommon to hear divorce, homosexuality, alcohol etc. mentioned from the pulpit; topics which would rarely have been explored in churches before. This is not only because they are on the TV each night but its an attempt to relate to the congregation in the pews who are dealing with these issues in their own lives. The old taboos may not have gone completely but preachers and clerics now have to speak of their reality in a more pluralist context.

Concepts like relativism, dismantling, existentialism and deconstructualism often associated with the post modern era must also have had an affect on thinking.

I suppose dismantling the perceived truth is what we have been talking about. Many Christians particularly young people are asking serious questions about the ‘traditional’ truths and values passed on to them. They measure real human behaviour against the rhetoric and question its validity.

This is also true for the idea of relativism. They measure the relevance of certain statements against the reality of their

own lives and then accept what rings true. In the post-modern world view everything is relative and can therefore be legitimately broken down or deconstructed.

This generation has had the opportunity of higher education. People are expected to think for themselves in their student and professional lives and this creates major challenges for a church culture which traditionally has been a place of passive acceptance. 'Why?', is considered a reasonable response where once it was taboo.

The growth of popular psychology and philosophy has also contributed to a climate which questions everything and a new realism which challenges existing Church methodology and practice.

YMCA staff are placed in situations where they are working with young people who have considerable personal need, this has affected their own priorities and transformed many of them as Christians.

In 1994 Tony Campolo took a seminar in Belfast YMCA. During it he presented the model of praxis ie action – reflection – revised action. This is a model familiar to youth workers and for many YMCA staff. A naïŕve vision for acting out their personal Christian mission has been changed, as they have worked alongside young people and discovered love is not expressed when all you have to give is your own agenda and a route to join your particular 'group' or 'club'. Reflective workers have dismantled their own agendas and discovered much more reality in the relationships and learned that respect is a fundamental aspect within any expression of love. This process in turn has created new beliefs, producing greater clarity for some, and the converse for others.

### **WHO IS WRITING ABOUT THIS PHENOMENON AND WHAT ARE THEY SAYING?**

This thinking is not a recent phenomenon but is heavily influenced by post-modern philosophy and writings within the last 20-30 years. However, within the church and theological contexts the ground breaking and best selling book by Dave Tomlinson "The Post Evangelical" (1995) brought to light post-modern themes that have influenced the church and helped to question basic principles and premises.

More recent publications such as "Soul Tsunami" (1999) by Leonard Sweet and "Church After Christendom" (2005) by Stuart Murray expand some of these themes further and challenge the reader's response to communicating Christianity in a post-modern world. Clearly these are not conclusive reading but rather mark a shift in thinking. The basic premise in much of this writing is that while old certainties have gone nevertheless living with uncertainty can be welcomed and actually seen as a positive for the church.

Steve Chalke and Dallas Willard have also challenged the old thinking asking do the churches' (or Church members') actions have integrity with their statements, creeds and pronouncements.

### **WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF THIS ON THE YMCA AS AN ORGANISATION?**

The YMCA community reflects the individual struggles and dilemmas around these issues, but three major changes can be seen:

---

*"a lot of people say Post modernists are not interested in truth. I say post modernists are more interested in truth than modernists.... For modernists Truth was a principle, a law, for post modernist Truth is a relationship." Leonard Sweet – Soul Tsunami 1999*

---

The organisation now values diversity highly and although not a fully pluralist organisation it strives for pluralist thought within a Christian context.

The organisation now wants to operate as a community which encourages dialogue and change – it tries to act in an inclusive rather than exclusive manner.

The organisation is slow to assert absolute positions but instead lives with dialogue and dilemmas – it tries to drop legalistic outlooks and language which can often undermine the practice of grace.

### **WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF THIS ON THE EXPRESSION OF THE YMCA'S TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN EMPHASIS?**

I suppose the biggest change in this generation of YMCA work has been the

move to Christian Social action and away from the traditional model of evangelism. This reflects the strong emphasis placed on holistic support for the YMCA user and genuine concern for their well being. It deems that only by acting out Christianity can we learn to truly interpret it and be transformed by it.

Secondly, there is less focus on Bible study and more emphasis, for staff and others, on 'reflective practice'. This means personal examination of our values, beliefs and actions, creating space for workers to consider the impact of their work and whether it's 'Good News' or not.

### **WHAT ARE YOUR CONCLUSIONS AND PREDICTIONS?**

The YMCA has non Christians and Christians of all backgrounds in its staff, volunteers and management. It receives support from all sorts of sources, government, charitable trusts and business activities. The effect of practical social action, equity, diversity and interdependence thinking and post

modernism has been profound, inspiring and enriching.

Of course the new place where the YMCA finds itself is full of dilemmas and not as 'safe' or 'secure' as traditional positions, but this way of working places integrity, justice and respect at the forefront, without diminishing in anyway the wonder of Christ's redemptive role in human history. The process is helping individuals rediscover the meaning of words like grace, love and respect. It presents a bigger vision of God and a more humbling understanding of self.

*"a lot of people say Post modernists are not interested in truth. I say post modernists are more interested in truth than modernists.... For modernists Truth was a principle, a law, for post modernist Truth is a relationship." Leonard Sweet – Soul Tsunami 1999.*

## Communicating A Book Based Faith To A Post-Literate Generation?

Dissertation Abstract by Sue Pearmain

*This dissertation by Sue Pearmain (Cork City YMCA) for Brunel University aims to explore ways in which Christian youth workers can communicate their faith to young people who do not engage with text based teaching and learning methodologies. The research for the essay was undertaken in Cork specifically for the YMCA.*

Ireland is a society that has experienced rapid social change over the last thirty years. It is shifting from being religious to an increasingly secularised society, and, from a modern to a post-modern culture.

Alongside these changes, is a growing concern that we are becoming post-literate and that the book is fast becoming extinct. This is due to a shift away from traditional text based learning to that of image, sound, hypertext, multi media, non-verbal and oral communication methods. It has created a challenge for anyone involved in youth work or education and we need to adapt methodologies appropriately.

The dissertation outlines how issues such as post-modernity, post-literacy, the non-book culture, primary and secondary orality and how they impact on Christianity. It explores post-modern Irish youth culture and spirituality using qualitative methodologies and gives insight into the ways young people are learning.

The analysis shows that young people prefer experiential, relational, visual, interactive and participatory learning styles and, considering these, there are recommendations as to how to use these styles for the purpose of communicating faith.

The full dissertation can be found on the YMCA's Website

[www.ymca-ireland.org](http://www.ymca-ireland.org)

# Issues for

By Michele Taylor

*Over the last number of years, there has been an overwhelming embrace and sensitivity by government towards the potential of Faith Groups to contribute to the wellbeing of the community in terms of 'Social Capital' and 'Social Economy'.*

Here Michele Taylor, a Development Officer with National Council, looks at how these terms are defined and what their possible impact might be for the YMCA in the future.

## WHAT IS SOCIAL CAPITAL?

The concept of 'Social Capital' is not a new one, though unfortunately, there is still no one universally agreed definition. Several theorists have emerged over the last decade or so who have addressed the concept from various points of view, such as Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman who considered social capital in terms of the benefits to the individual and community and Robert Putnam, who widened those benefits to a more global network. However, without delving into a detailed critique of each of their theories, social capital is, in the most simplistic of beginner terms, a process that enables people to gain access to the material resources of a community.

In order, 'to gain access', we are implying that some form of relationship be forged between 2 or more parties. We are also implying that there be some degree of 'trust' within this relationship, between individuals or groups, who have either

resources or access to resources needed to achieve the desired goals and outcomes for the community.

Again in simplistic terms, in order to fully meet the needs of a community, the term social capital is highlighting the need for elements such as partnerships, networks, community knowledge and participation, cooperation and trust.

---

*...social capital is, in the most simplistic of beginner terms, a process that enables people to gain access to the material resources of a community.*

---

## WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FAITH COMMUNITY?

In his book 'Communities, Churches and Social Capital' (2003), Derek Bacon, profiles 12 faith based organisations and churches in N Ireland, (including YMCA Ireland). The report identifies and assesses the public benefit work of these organisations, in terms of responding to need and contributing to the building of a more inclusive society. In doing so it provides examples of church-related voluntary action which offers the



# the future...

potential for developing social capital in terms of coordinating social resources in order to address community issues.

He outlines how over the last number of years, the term 'social capital' has been intertwined with labour government thinking and policy development, in the UK. The potential of churches and other faith based organisations within this process has also been embraced.

It is now widely recognised that churches can and do play a major role in the community, even if this potential is often unrealised. Many faith-based organisations are involved in community projects tackling social inadequacies, and injustices. They are able to do so in part because of their ability to access resources through their established networks and contacts, and also as a result of the trust that has been nurtured between them and the community.

Mr Bacon continues by describing how this link between government thinking and the faith community in the UK has manifested itself in many new initiatives, including neighbourhood renewal schemes, the New Deal for Communities programme and most recently the publication of 'Faith and Community': A good practice guide from the Local Government Association which encourages local authorities to develop partnerships with faith communities and to recognise their importance to the voluntary sector. (LGA 2002). To date however the same initiatives have not been so forthcoming in N. Ireland.

The second term which we are now being encouraged to embrace by our funders is that of 'Social Economy'.

This model is one whereby the organisation is 'self-generating' a proportion of the funding required to implement its programmes. Locally one example of this would be at Belfast YMCA based at Lagan Meadows. Here a very successful Day-Care programme provides part of the income which enables the association to carry out many of the other programmes which it offers to the community.

Other examples of this might be an association having a shop or café as part of its programme. Again the profits from such initiatives would then be used to support the youth and community projects which the association has developed.

Regardless of where we sit with each of these concepts, the fact remains that social capital and social economy are two concepts which will undoubtedly continue to impact on churches and other faith-based organisations such as the YMCA in the future. It is an area which we must start to understand and be willing at some level to engage with in the future.

## CHALLENGES

For the YMCA, the future presents many challenges. As an organisation which has held on to its Christian ethos since its inception in 1844, we have to address many issues that are impacting on the voluntary sector.

## *Key questions to consider:*

- As a 'Professional' and Christian Voluntary Organisation, how do we ensure that we employ the 'best' person for the job regardless of their faith background, whilst at the same time ensuring that we maintain our Christian Ethos?
- In our increasing diverse society, how are we to ensure that our Christian framework does not present a barrier to participation by all?
- As the YMCA focuses more on Christian social action, where do we find our next generation of leaders?
- How does a faith based organisation continue to flourish and develop, when our churches are going through a period of tremendous change?
- Finally, how do we stay true to ourselves and our ethos by ensuring that any grant aid we receive is used only towards our 'social action' programmes, and not towards the delivery of our Christian emphasis?

Such questions may not be easy to answer or reconcile, but we have a responsibility to ask them of ourselves, in order that we maintain our integrity and ethos in an uncertain future.

Reference - Derek Bacon, 'Communities, Churches and Social Capital in Northern Ireland' 2003

# the acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the following individuals

## For editing this journal

### Ivan McMahon

Deputy National Secretary,  
YMCA Ireland

### Michele Taylor

PAKT Co-ordinator,  
YMCA Ireland

### Mark Hammond

Community Relations Coordinator,  
YMCA Ireland

### Stephen Turner

National Secretary,  
YMCA Ireland

## For contributing to this journal

### Brian Murtagh

### Cesca Tyrrell

### Gareth Johnston

### Gef Dickson

### Geraldine Stinton

### Hedley Abernethy

### Helen Jary

### Hugo Dale

### Ivan McMahon

### Kitty Dullea

### Mark Hammond

### Mary McLean

### Michele Taylor

### Stephen Turner

### Stewart Morris

### Sue Pearmain

...Thanks

# the contacts

## National Secretary

### Stephen Turner

YMCA Ireland, Memorial House,  
Waring Street, Belfast, BT1 2EU

Tel: 028 9032 7757

Fax: 028 9043 8809

E.Mail: [stephen@ymca-ireland.org](mailto:stephen@ymca-ireland.org)

## Deputy National Secretary

### Ivan McMahon

5 Parknamore Heights,  
Ballincollig, Co Cork

Tel: 021 4850015

Fax: 021 4850015

E.Mail: [mcmahoni@indigo.ie](mailto:mcmahoni@indigo.ie)

## Development Officer

### Michele Taylor

YMCA Ireland, Memorial House,  
Waring Street, Belfast, BT1 2EU

Tel: 028 9032 7757

Fax: 028 9043 8809

E.Mail: [michele@ymca-ireland.org](mailto:michele@ymca-ireland.org)



Memorial House  
Waring Street  
Belfast BT1 EU